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*Luftgangster*¹ over Germany: The Lynching of American Airmen in the Shadow of the Air War

Kevin T. Hall*

Abstract: *„Luftgangster“ über Deutschland: Lynchjustiz gegen amerikanische Flieger im Schatten des Luftkrieges*. This study analyzes the Lynchjustiz committed against American airmen in Germany during World War II. Largely overlooked by historians, the extent of violence against flyers is drastically underestimated, hindered by the complex historical memory of the Allied air war, the arduous denazification process, and the looming Cold War of the postwar era. While the precise number of Allied flyers that experienced Lynchjustiz is impossible to determine, due to a lack of remaining records, this study provides a more accurate estimate and an improved historical analysis of the broader impact of these events on history. Lynchjustiz initially occurred as a spontaneous response to the devastating experiences of the Allied air war in 1943. The Nazi regime took advantage of German citizens' plight to endure the overwhelming and inexorable air war that erased all physically and psychologically boundaries and attempted to harness the outrage of the German population, redirecting the anger explicitly against the new enemy in their midst. Individuals and groups of civilians, Party officials, security forces, government officials, as well as military members carried out this state-sponsored vigilantism, which was a byproduct of the political and societal instability produced by the Nazi regime.

Keywords: Lynching, Lynchjustiz, downed airmen, prisoners of war, World War II, war crimes, flyer trials.

1. Introduction

Returning from a bombing mission over northern Germany on August 13, 1944, an American bomber crew bailed out over enemy territory after flak disabled their aircraft. Likely their first jump out of an airplane, the flyers were full of adrenaline and anxiety about the fate that awaited them. One airman

¹ The term *Luftgangster* means “gangsters of the air” and was often used in Nazi propaganda to refer to Allied airmen. This article is based on the following doctoral thesis: Hall, Kevin T. 2018. ‘Terror Flyers’ and the German Public: The Lynching of American Airmen in Nazi Germany. Dissertation, Central Michigan University.

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landed safely in a field next to a highway near Lübeck-Siems, Germany, fourteen miles from the Baltic Sea, and German soldiers immediately captured him.² In addition to landing safely, being in the custody of soldiers must have offered an initial sense of relief for the flyer, since rumors among airmen described German security forces, Party officials, and especially civilians as likely to be more hostile to downed airmen than soldiers. Downed flyers who evaded capture and returned to England with the aid of resistance fighters, as well as prisoners of war (POWs) who had returned through medical exchanges, all bolstered these rumors with personal accounts of seeing Allied flyers hanged from lampposts in bombed-out cities or from beams at train stations.³

Yet as the soldiers escorted the flyer along the highway towards the city of Lübeck, his sense of relief quickly turned to fear. An angry mob incensed by the aerial attacks (made up mainly of civilians, two SS soldiers, and the local block leader) encircled him. The block leader, a low-level Nazi Party official responsible for neighborhood supervision, told the two soldiers guarding the flyer to “leave him to us so that we can have some sport with him.”⁴ After SS and Party officials questioned the airman about his nationality, the mob (including women) beat him mercilessly with farm tools, steel helmets, and anything they had at hand. The terrified flyer bled profusely as they ruthlessly directed blows at his head. The injuries quickly took their toll on the airman, who collapsed from the pain and shock, but the crowd did not stop after they rendered him unconscious. They beat him until his face was unrecognizable then dragged his lifeless body back into the cornfield, where the block leader shot him eight times in the back and the head. The perpetrators then threw his body in the trunk of a nearby vehicle and buried his remains in an unmarked grave.

A United States postwar crime tribunal tried twelve of the perpetrators in March and April of 1947 in Dachau for willfully, deliberately, and wrongfully encouraging and abetting in the killing of the unknown American flyer. While two civilians were acquitted, five perpetrators – including one woman and an

² The fate of the remaining bomber crewmembers remains unknown. The names of airmen are given when known. Only one-third of known American airmen who experienced mistreatment were identified.

³ Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-2370; Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153; Entry 143; Box 419, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-1994; Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153; Entry 143; Box 403, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; “Citizens Menaced Hamburg Bombers,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1943; “Germany Admits Fliers’ Lynchings,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1944.

⁴ Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-1307; Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153; Entry 143; Box 350, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

SS soldier – received sentences ranging from one to ten years; however, the West German government released them all by 1952. The block leader who executed the flyer received a death sentence, while two civilians and an SS soldier received life imprisonment; yet each of these men had also received parole by the spring of 1954.⁵

Stories such as this, though vicious and largely forgotten in popular memory, were not uncommon. From 1943 to 1945, instances of mob mentality gripped German citizens, who sought revenge for personal and material losses, throughout Nazi Germany and its occupied territories. Identified as “lynch justice” (*Lynchjustiz*) by the Nazi regime, instances are documented in nearly every country in Europe, ranging from Italy to Denmark, from France to Poland, throughout the Baltic Region, and everywhere in between.⁶ Moreover, Germans were not the sole perpetrators of such violence against downed airmen. Although they represented the largest group of criminals, perpetrators of various European nationalities existed and acted either in accordance with the Nazi regime or sought personal revenge, e.g., for the destruction caused by the Allied air war.

While a few historians have focused mainly on a limited number cases involving the violence against American airmen during World War II, the topic remains largely overlooked and the actual extent of the mistreatment of Allied flyers is greatly underestimated (Sigel 1992; Brode 1997; Stiepani 1999; Greene 2003; Vourkoutiotis 2003; Hilton 2004; Friedrich 2006; Riedel 2006; Weingartner 2008). The most infamous incident was the Rüsselsheim massacre, which occurred on August 26, 1944 (Neliba 2000; Freeman 2011). Following a devastating bombing raid by the British Royal Air Force (RAF), German civilians and political officials ruthlessly beat eight American airmen who were being transferred to the interrogation camp (*Dulag Luft*) located in Oberursel, which was less than thirty miles away from Rüsselsheim. Six of the flyers died and two managed to escape and survived the war.⁷

Encompassing all levels of society, the violence against downed Allied airmen reiterates the extensive brutality and immorality that occurred during the war. While historians have revealed that German citizens played a key role as

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Throughout this study, the term *Lynchjustiz* will refer to the mistreatment (both assaults and killings) experienced by downed airmen in World War II.

⁷ Sergeant Elmore L. Austin (Edinburg Falls, Vermont), Sergeant William A. Dumont (Berlin, New Hampshire), Second Lieutenant Norman J. Rogers, Jr. (Rochester, New York), Second Lieutenant John N. Sekul (Bronx, New York), Flight Officer Haigus Tufenkjian (Detroit, Michigan), Staff Sergeant Thomas D. Williams, Jr. (Hazelton, Pennsylvania), Sergeant William A. Adams (Klingerstown, Pennsylvania), and Sergeant Sidney Eugene Brown (Gainesville, Florida). Adams and Brown managed to survive the brutal beatings. They escaped from the cemetery, where they were left on a cart to die. They evaded for four days until Nazi officials captured them. The two men spent the remainder of the war in a POW camp, Stalag Luft IV in Tychowo, Poland.

informants in the Gestapo's control over the nation (Gellately 1990, Johnson 2000, Gellately 2002), *Lynchjustiz* highlights an even more direct involvement in violence by German civilians that has previously been overlooked. Influenced by Nazi propaganda, along with the devastation caused by the air war, Anglo-American airmen were often viewed as "terror flyers" (*Terrorflieger*), "gangsters of the air" (*Luftgangster*), and "child murderers" (*Kindermörder*) [see Image 1].

Image 1: "Roosevelt's Strafers against Women and Children. North American? – Murder American"⁸



Scholars commonly agree that roughly 350 British and American airmen experienced *Lynchjustiz* during World War II. This estimate is centered on historian Barbara Grimm's brief analysis, which was influenced by German historian Ralf Blank's supposition; yet, no significant research has confirmed or challenged this notion (Blank 2008; Grimm 2007). Despite using little archival evidence to support Blank and Grimm's claims, historians have repeatedly cited these estimates. Representing a fallacy of prevalent proof, historians have passed on this long-standing, and unverified, narrative of *Lynchjustiz* as fact

⁸ "Roosevelts Tiefflieger gegen Frauen und Kinder," *Völkischer Beobachter* (Berlin), June 14, 1944.

(Evans 2009, 465; Overy 2013, 310; Hoffmann 2015, 233, 383). Yet, what did *Lynchjustiz* actually entail? Were airmen exclusively killed or did the violence include assaults as well? Who were the perpetrators? Why did they carry out this form of vigilante justice? How often did *Lynchjustiz* occur? What new information can be ascertained about the social milieu of Nazi Germany by analyzing *Lynchjustiz* committed against airmen? These are a few guiding questions around which this article will focus.

Building upon the limited research on *Lynchjustiz* committed against downed Allied airmen, Austrian historian Georg Hoffmann is the most recent scholar to study this phenomenon. Hoffmann concluded that there were roughly 1,000 cases (including both murders and assaults) of *Lynchjustiz* against American airmen throughout Europe (Hoffmann 2015, 383). In fact, he determined that more cases of mistreatment occurred in Austria and Hungary than in any other country – roughly 600, of which 130 resulted in death (Hoffmann 2015, 383). However, like previous historians, Hoffmann assumed that the historiographical standard of 350 cases of *Lynchjustiz* is accurate. Nevertheless, his study is a valued attempt at investigating these relatively unknown incidents.

Hoffmann is the first to not only include in his study the mistreated victims who survived, but also to analyze the perpetrators who carried out these acts of violence. Perpetrators' backgrounds and societal positions are key to understanding not only the phenomenon's origins but also how it persisted. Scholars have failed, however, to determine the extent of violence in Germany or address the symbolic meaning of lynching. While the precise number of Allied flyers that experienced *Lynchjustiz* is impossible to determine, due to a lack of documentation, the need for a more accurate estimate as well as a better historical analysis of the broader impact of these events on history is apparent.

The initial attempt to document *Lynchjustiz* cases already began at the end of 1944, as the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expedition Force (SHAEF), commanded by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, instructed Army group commanders to create a detailed list of alleged war crimes committed against American nationals. Commanders were not tasked, however, with actually investigating or gathering any additional evidence. Investigations began immediately following the war and became part of the so-called Dachau trials. Largely overshadowed by the infamous trials at Nuremberg, which targeted high-ranking Nazi officials' crimes against humanity, lower-ranking war criminals were prosecuted at the Dachau trials from 1945 to 1947.⁹ These tribunals held over 400 trials that prosecuted over 1,500 "lesser" war criminals, with

⁹ For more information on the process and procedures of investigating war crimes, see: Hall 2018.

American airmen representing the largest group of victims.¹⁰ The cases that focused specifically on the mistreatment of airmen are known as the flyer trials. The remaining trials dealt with crimes against Americans and Europeans at various concentration camps (e.g. Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, Mühldorf, and Dora-Nordhausen), the Malmedy Massacre (the execution of eighty-four POWs during the Battle of the Bulge), and the Skorzeny trial, which dealt with German soldiers wearing United States military uniforms during a false flag operation.

Although the flyer trials surely do not describe every instance pertaining to the mistreatment of downed airmen, they represent the largest known collection of documents pertaining to this topic. Moreover, analyzing these trials offers an attempt to characterize the type of perpetrators most likely to have been involved in *Lynchjustiz*, their reasoning for committing violence, and provide the potential to uncover previously unknown war crimes. In fact, the remains of airmen from World War II are still being uncovered today in Germany and throughout the world.¹¹ Thus, analyzing these trials provides a valuable opportunity to establish a basis for understanding the process and extent of these atrocities, as well as offers a comparison for future studies to build on.

The lynching of Allied airmen reveals an aspect of the war that historians have overlooked, namely, the explicit involvement and culpability of the German home front – whether security forces or soldiers, Party officials or civilians, men or women – in committing violence against POWs. Given certain situational circumstances, – e.g., an environment of total war where violence was sanctioned by the regime and a society that perceived the war as an ultimate fight for survival – the German public (in varying degrees) tolerated and participated in the killing of downed Allied airmen. As historian Hew Strachan reasoned, perpetrators may need to be instructed by the state “to get over their initial revulsion, and they may still need the state’s authority to rationalize their actions to themselves, but in the immediacy of killing other more basic impulses – including sadism – can come into play” (Strachan 2005, 47). Given the intensity and totality of the war, especially in the final year, violence, such as *Lynchjustiz*, “could result as easily from a sense of panic and crisis as from any

¹⁰ The term “lesser” war crime trials, in accordance to the Moscow Declaration, distinguished the accused perpetrators from the high-profile war criminals at the Nuremberg trials. In no way does it refer to the severity of their accused crimes committed.

¹¹ For example, see: “Remains of Pilot Shot Down during WWII to be Buried in N.Y.” CBS News. November 28, 2017. <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robert-mains-pilot-shot-down-wwii-remains-n-y-burial/>>; “Cleveland WWII Airman Receives Funeral in Willoughby.” *The News-Herald*. June 2, 2015. <<http://www.news-herald.com/article/hr/20150502/NEWS/150509896>>; “Remains of Fallen WWII Airman Returned to Family for Burial.” *Stars and Stripes*. August 23, 2012. <<https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/germany/remains-of-fallen-wwii-airman-returned-to-family-for-burial-1.186673>>; “WWII Army Aircrew Laid to Rest.” *Army News*. October 26, 2011. <https://www.army.mil/article/68064/wwii_army_aircrew_laid_to_rest>.

sense of collective cohesion,” as historian Nicholas Stargardt clarified (Stargardt 2017, 411).

Germany’s devastating loss at Stalingrad in February of 1942, its defeat in North Africa in May of 1943, and the Allied invasion of Italy and France were turning points in the war – both strategically and psychologically – and facilitated the Allied advance across Europe. Not until the Casablanca Conference in 1943, however, was Hitler’s uncompromising will to wage war met by the Allies’ unequivocal response to seek victory at all costs, as the Combined Bomber Offensive targeted Germany’s economic and industrial capability to wage war around-the-clock (Förster 2005, 91). Moreover, the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, changed Hitler’s attitude with regard to imposing total war. While Goebbels had promoted mobilizing German society for total war since 1942, Hitler and many others had avoided this; they feared that this would lead to a collapse of the home front – as had occurred in World War I – and that this would result in not only Germany losing the war but the inability of the Aryan race to survive. Nazi leadership imbued an even more radical sense of purpose following the attempt on Hitler’s life. Goebbels was appointed Plenipotentiary for total war measures, which resulted in the increased control over the German population to support the war effort. An increasing amount of responsibility for the defense of Germany fell to the various regional Nazi Party leaders (*Gauleiter*), who were, for example, involved in expressing the regime’s desire to lynch downed Allied airmen. Yet, despite the regime’s attempt to keep the “people’s community” or “national community” (*Volkgemeinschaft*) under control, it was never capable of exerting total control, as Jürgen Förster clarified (Förster 2005, 93-4).¹² The final step in mobilizing German society for total war was the establishment of the *Volkssturm* in September of 1944, as it sought to incorporate the remainder of civilians (mostly young boys, old men, and women) in the war effort.

2. The Escalation of *Lynchjustiz*

During World War II, the Nazi regime fully embraced the concept of lynching. This resulted in the increased agency of German citizens, albeit under the observation of the police state. Support for such violence gradually increased throughout the war, as the devastation caused by the air war increased, along with a number of unfulfilled promises by the Nazi regime, e.g. “revenge weapons” (*Vergeltungswaffen*). The number of lynchings in Germany increased in direct proportion to the increase in Allied sorties flown over Germany, as this

¹² For more information on *Volkgemeinschaft*, see: Broszat 1983; Bergerson 2004; Welch 2004; Süß and Süß 2008; Bajohr and Wildt 2009; Wildt 2011; Schmiechen-Ackermann 2012; Keller 2013; Steber and Gotto 2014; Stargardt 2017.

brought an amplified number of enemy airmen in contact with the German home front [see Charts 1¹³ and 2¹⁴].

Chart 1: American Airplanes Lost in the European Theater

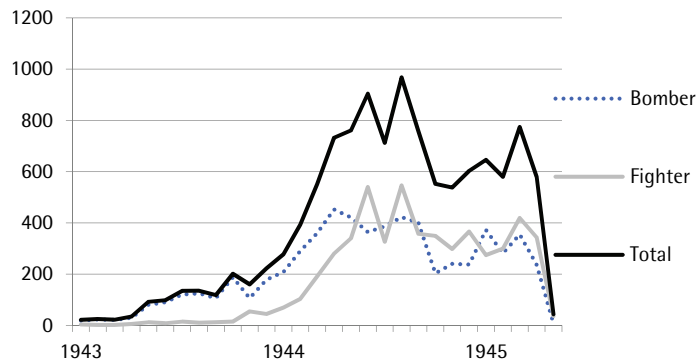
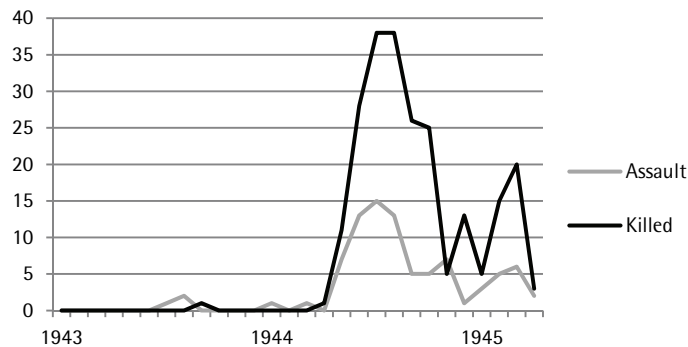


Chart 2: Lynchjustiz Committed against Downed Airmen in Germany



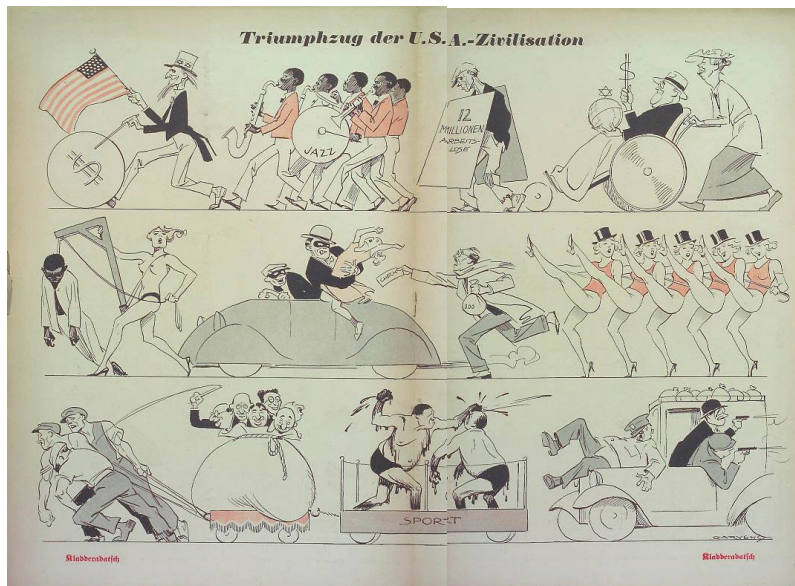
While the history of the United States was fairly well-known by the Nazi elite, the regime published a series of newspaper columns in the *Völkischer Beobachter* titled, for example, “What is English about Americanism?” beginning in the spring of 1944. These columns informed the public about the hypocritical history and questionable culture of the United States [see Image 2].¹⁵

¹³ *Army Air Forces Statistical Digest, World War II*. Office of Statistical Control–December 1945. Battle Casualties in European Theater by Casualty Type, Table 159.

¹⁴ Deputy Theater Judge Advocate’s Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946. Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153, Entry 143, Box 155–510, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁵ Fürholzer, Edmund. “Was ist englisch am Amerikanismus?,” *Völkischer Beobachter* (Berlin), April 14–16, 1944; See also: Böttiger 1944.

Image 2: "Triumphal Procession of the U.S. Civilization"



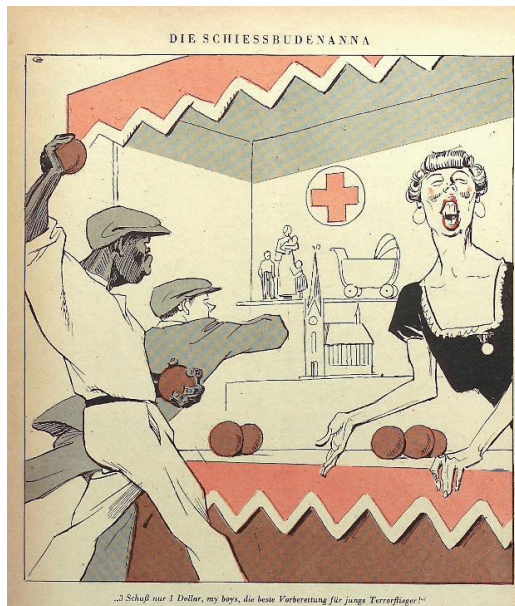
Source: Kladderadatsch, November 1, 1942, <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kla1942/0696>> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

In addition, propaganda images [see Image 3, 4, and 5] aggressively portrayed Allied airmen not only as the key symbol of American savagery and immorality but also as the bearers of responsibility for the destructive and devastating air war over Germany. By summer of 1944, *ex-post facto* propaganda depicted the appropriateness of *Lynchjustiz* against downed airmen because the Allied air war bombed urban areas, which resulted in civilian casualties. This form of violence was often portrayed as “American justice,” as lynchings were used to punish alleged criminals throughout the United States. Therefore, it was viewed as a fitting means to seek retribution.¹⁶ Moreover, the institutionalized racism against African-Americans and the allegedly immoral culture in the United States was often a symbolic topic expressed in propaganda images. Propaganda attempted to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the American government for relying on African-Americans – often depicted as American flyers in propaganda images – to fight in the name of democracy despite a long history of enslavement, subjugation, and racism.¹⁷

¹⁶ Examples of propaganda magazines included: *Kladderadatsch*, *Lustige Blätter*, and *Fliegende Blätter*, and *Das Schwarze Korps*.

¹⁷ For more information on the portrayal of American flyers and lynching in Nazi propaganda, see: Hall 2018.

Image 3: At the "Shooting Stand," Eleanor Roosevelt states, "3 throws for just 1 dollar, my boys. The best training for young terror flyers!"



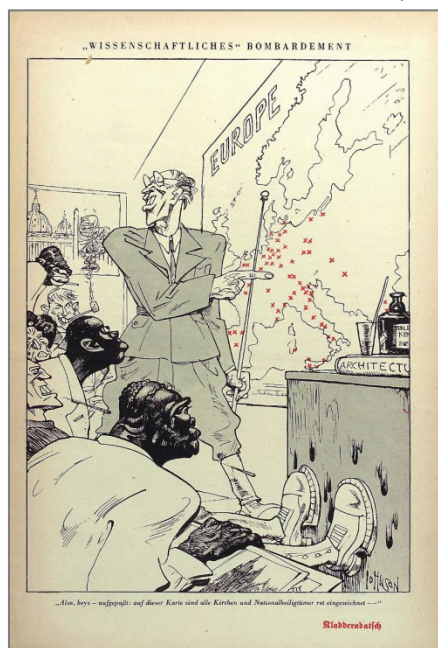
Source: Kladderadatsch, November 28, 1943, <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kla1943/0625>> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

Lynchjustiz blurred the parameters of war, representing an activity waged for (and in the name of) the regime out of political and strategic purposes but also as an endorsed, individual act of personal revenge by the German public. Downed Allied airmen offered the German home front – specifically civilians – an opportunity to actively confront the enemy, who they viewed was responsible for the air war. As the Allied bombing raids increasingly disrupted the way of life for the German home front, it made the war more personal for the German public and it resulted in the possibility of more extreme reactions, as the mobilization of the *Volksgemeinschaft* increased after the summer of 1944 (Strachan 2005, 51).¹⁸ While *Lynchjustiz* was a logical response in the minds of many individuals affected by the war, this violence “did not require Nazified zealots (though surely such were not lacking), [but] merely conscientious and politically obtuse soldiers [and civilians] to carry out the reprisals,” as historian Jürgen Förster confirmed (Förster 2005, 106). The bombing of cities inflicted great turmoil on all individuals, especially civilians, during the war, and

¹⁸ As Hew Strachan declared, “the more personal the combat, the more brutal it seemed to become.”

wreaked angst, devastation, despair, frustration, and death. Struggle for national survival along with the desire to prevent the heavy losses and embarrassing defeat experienced in World War I provided the emotional foundation for the radicalization of war, which led to relaxed ethical limitations on violence.¹⁹

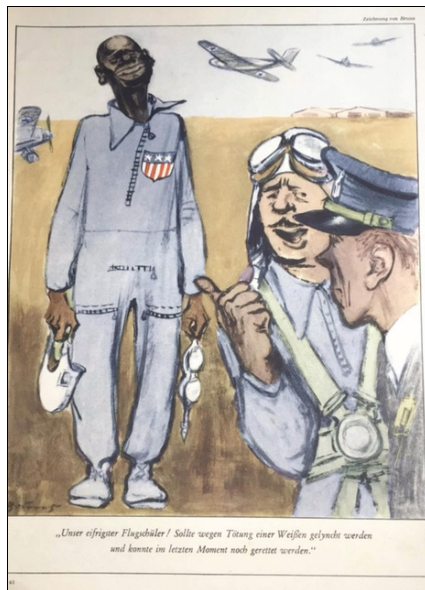
Image 4: "So boys – pay attention. All of the churches and national sanctuaries are marked in red on the map."



Source: Kladderadatsch, Number 96, August 15, 1943, p. 2, <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kla1943/0443>> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

¹⁹ For example, see: Kühne 2017.

Image 5: "Our enthusiastic student pilot! He was supposed to be lynched for killing a white person, but was able to be saved at the last minute."



Source: Lustige Blätter, Number 43, 1943.

Historians cite two main documents that indicate the Nazi regime condoned and urged *Lynchjustiz*. The first was Joseph Goebbels' article in the *Völkischer Beobachter* on May 27, 1944, while the second was Martin Bormann's letter to Reich leaders (*Reichsleitern*), regional leaders (*Gauleitern*), organization leaders (*Verbandsführer*), and local district leaders (*Kreisleitern*) on May 30, 1944. As Goebbels wrote:

It is only possible to protect the lives of downed enemy pilots with the use of armed forces, as the afflicted population would otherwise kill them. Who is right here? The murderers who, after their cowardly misdeeds, still expect humane treatment on the part of the victims or the victims who want to defend themselves according to the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This question is not difficult to answer. In any case, it would be intolerable to use German soldiers to protect child murderers from the rage-stricken parents who resort to self-defense after having just lost their most precious possessions through the brutal cynicism of the enemy.²⁰

²⁰ Joseph Goebbels 1944. See also, "The Terror Flyer Order" 1960, 166-9. The Original German text states: "Es ist nur mit Hilfe der bewaffneten Macht möglich, bei solchen Angriffen abgeschossene Feindpiloten in ihrem Leben zu sichern, da sie sonst von der heimgesuchten Bevölkerung totgeschlagen würden. Wer hat hier recht, die Mörder, die nach ihren feigen

Bormann's letter took Goebbels' article a step further, acknowledging that the German population had already lynched downed airmen repeatedly. Bormann wrote that

In recent weeks, English and North American airmen have repeatedly shot at children playing, women and children working in the fields, peasants working on farms, wagons on the road, etc. during low-level strafing attacks. This is the most awful way to murder defenseless civilians – especially women and children. It has often occurred that downed crewmembers of such aircraft were immediately arrested and lynched on the spot by the outraged population. Police and criminal prosecution of the people involved were omitted.²¹

Bormann's letter was distributed throughout the Nazi Party chain of command (e.g. *Reichsleiter*, *Gauleiter*, and *Kreisleiter*); however, he requested that local Nazi Party group leaders (*Ortsgruppenleiter*) be notified verbally. This was done in a similar fashion with the "Final Solution." The effect and interpretation of this letter can be seen in an order issued by Albert Hoffman – Gauleiter and National Defense Commissioner of the Gau Westphalia South – to county Nazi Party leaders (*Kreisleiter*) and *Volkssturm* officials on February 25, 1945. The order reads as follows:

Any fighter-bomber pilots shot down are on principle not to be protected against the indignation of the people. I expect from all police offices that they will refuse to lend their protection to these gangster types. Authorities acting in contradiction to the popular sentiment will be taken to account by me. All police and gendarmerie officials are to be informed immediately by this, my attitude.²²

Untaten noch eine humane Behandlung seitens ihrer Opfer erwarten, oder die Opfer, die sich nach dem Grundsatz zur Wehr setzen wollen: Auge um Auge, Zahn um Zahn? Diese Fragen dürften nicht schwer zu beantworten sein. Jedenfalls wäre es zuviel von uns verlangt, wenn man von uns forderte, dass wir deutsche Soldaten zum Schutz fuer Kindermörder einsetzen, gegen die die von rasender Wut ergriffenen Eltern, die gerade ihr kostbarstes Gut durch den brutalen Zynismus des Feindes verloren haben, zur Selbstwehr schreiten."

²¹ Martin Bormann, "Volksjustiz gegen anglo-amerikanische Mörder," Letter to Reichsleiter, Gauleiter, Verbändeführer, and Kreisleiter. August 30, 1944. NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36: Records of United States Army, Europe, 1942-1991. The original German text states: "*Englische und nordamerikanische Flieger haben in den letzten Wochen wiederholt im Tiefflug auf Plätzen spielende Kinder, Frauen und Kinder bei der Feldarbeit, pflügende Bauern, Fuhrwerke auf der Landstrasse, Eisenbahnzüge usw. aus geringer Höhe mit Bordwaffen beschossen und dabei auf gemeinste Weise wehrlose Zivilisten – insbesondere Frauen und Kinder – hingemordet. Mehrfach ist es vorgekommen, dass abgesprungene oder notgelandete Besatzungsmitglieder solcher Flugzeuge unmittelbar nach der Festnahme durch die auf das Äußerste empörte Bevölkerung an Ort und Stelle gelyncht wurden. Von polizeilicher und strafgerichtlicher Verfolgung der dabei beteiligten Volksgenossen wurde abgesehen."*

²² Order from Albert Hoffman, Gauleiter and National Defense Commissioner for the Gau Westphalia South, to Nazi Party county leaders (*Kreisleiter*) and *Volkssturm* officials. February 25, 1945. NARA, Microfilm T-1021, Roll 10. 12-1077, Vol. 9; see also: *Trial of The*

Yet, these were not the only documents that bolstered the expansion of *Lynchjustiz*. Hitler's Commando Order from October 18, 1942, stated that "from now on, all enemy soldiers ... in battle or attempting to escape are to be killed (*niederzumachen*) down to the last man regardless of whether they are seamen, airmen, or paratroopers. Secret agents and saboteurs ... are to be given over to the SD."²³ This set the precedence for the verbal order to "exterminate terror and sabotage troops."²⁴ By August of 1943, Heinrich Himmler was involved in the development of *Lynchjustiz*, ordering in a short memo that "It is not the job of the police to interfere between the German people (*Volksgenossen*) and downed English and American terror flyers."²⁵ In a meeting on May 16, 1944, Goering even proposed on-the-spot executions of such downed airmen.²⁶ Accordingly, the five aforementioned documents show the escalation of *Lynchjustiz*, which began as a decentralized form of popular justice by German citizens in an attempt to seek revenge for the devastation caused by the air war, but by the summer of 1944 it became a state-sponsored form of combatting the enemy and seeking revenge.

Throughout June of 1944, the process of finalizing the classification of a terror flyer took place at a meeting with representatives from the Reich Foreign Affairs Office (*Auswärtige Amt*), SS, High Command of the Air Force (*Oberkommando der Luftwaffe*), High Command of the Armed Forces (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*), and the commandant of the Luftwaffe interrogation center (*Dulag Luft*) in Oberursel.²⁷ In addition, these government officials established the procedure to deal with terror flyers as well as how to implement the topic of terror flyers in propaganda (both domestically and internationally). After an initial meeting on June 6, 1944, which coincided, though likely unintentionally, with the Allied invasion of Normandy, German officials decided

Major War Criminals Before The International Military Tribunal: Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 – 1 October 1946, Volume XX (Nuremberg, 1948), 54.

²³ Adolf Hitler. Commando Order, October 18, 1942. The original German text states: "Von jetzt ab sind alle ... Gegner ... im Kampf oder auf der Flucht bis auf den letzten Mann niederzumachen. Es ist dabei ganz gleich, ob sie zu ihren Aktionen durch Schiffe und Flugzeuge angelandet werden oder mittels Fallschirmen abspringen ... Agenten, Saboteurs, usw. ... sind sie dem SD zu übergeben." NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36.

²⁴ Wagner, letter attached to the forwarded Hitler Decree from October 18, 1942. The original German text states: "Anliegend wird ein Erlass des Führers über die Vernichtung von Terror- und Sabotagetruppe übersandt." NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36.

²⁵ Heinrich Himmler memo from August 10, 1943. The original German text states: "Es ist nicht Aufgabe die Polizei, sich in Auseinandersetzungen zwischen deutschen Volksgenossen und abgesprungenen englischen und amerikanischen Terrorfliegern einzumischen." NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36.

²⁶ Goering, Hermann. "Jägerbesprechung beim Reichsmarschall." May 16, 1944. NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36.

²⁷ For more information on the experiences of Allied airmen held at Dulag Luft in Oberursel, see: Hall 2018; Geck 2008.

that “*Lynchjustiz* would have to be considered as the rule.”²⁸ The specifics were set by June 14, 1944, with the Foreign Affairs Office agreeing to them by June 20, 1944, despite its “obvious objections founded on international law.”²⁹

Influenced by Japan’s Enemy Airmen’s Act (from August 13, 1942), which allowed airmen to be sentenced to death for attacking civilians and non-military targets, Germany established four criteria that constituted acts of terror for which airmen could be executed.³⁰ These included:

- 1) Attacking civilians, individuals as well as crowds; 2) Firing at German shot-down aircrews parachuting in the air; 3) Attacking passenger trains in the public service; 4) Attacking military hospitals, civilian hospitals, and hospital trains, which are clearly marked with the Red Cross.³¹

This document was distributed by the High Command of the Armed Forces (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) to the Commander of the Luftwaffe (*Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe*), the Reich Foreign Ministry, the chiefs of the security police (Sipo), and the security service (SD). These four acts of terrorism were used as an attempt to justify *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment), even after airmen had already been captured as POWs, for example at *Dulag Luft* in Oberursel. Additionally, these criteria were to be used as justification when cases of *Lynchjustiz* were published, although no evidence indicates that specific cases were publicly circulated. Yet analysis of *Lynchjustiz* against American airmen indicates that participation in these alleged acts of terror was not required to result in mistreatment; rather, this was often used as *ex-post facto* justification. The mere association with the enemy and terror flyers was often enough justification for perpetrators to lynch airmen [see Image 6].³²

²⁸ “Behandlung der feindlichen Terrorflieger”, from Deputy Leader of the Armed Forces Operations Staff (Stellv. Chef WFSt.) from June 6, 1944. NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36. The original German text states: “*Die Lynchjustiz würde als die Regel zu gelten haben.*”

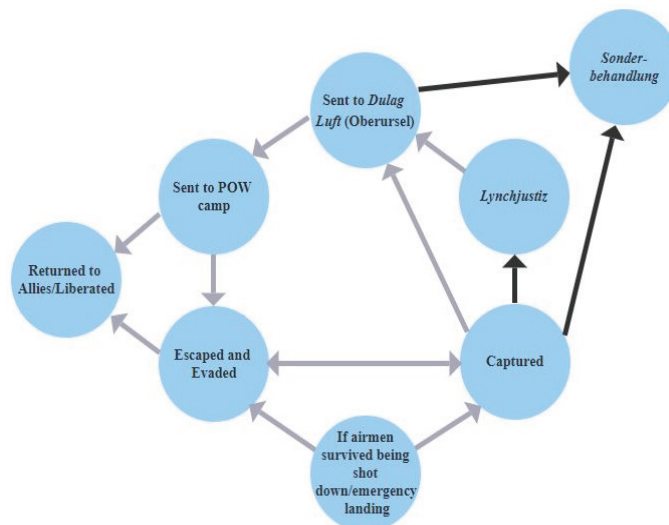
²⁹ Ambassador Ritter, “Draft of Letter from the Foreign Office to Chief OKW concerning treatment of enemy Terror Flyers,” To Chief of the High Command of the Armed Forces. Salzburg from June 20, 1944. *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No.10, Volume XI* (United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1960), 175-77.

³⁰ For more information regarding Japan’s Enemy Airmen’s Act, see: Piccigallo 1979; Morrow 2014; Guillemin 2017.

³¹ “Behandlung der feindl. Terrorflieger,” Letter from Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW/Armed Forces Operations Staff) to Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe (Commander in Chief Air Force) Concerning Treatment of Enemy “Terror” Flyers. June 14, 1944. *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No.10, Volume XI*. United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1960, 170-71. See also NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36.

³² For more information on the process of treating downed Allied airmen, see: Hall 2018.

Image 6: The Process of Treating Downed Airmen (Black Arrows Represent Mistreatment and Possible Death)



A great example of this is the previously mentioned Rüsselsheim Massacre. After parachuting and landing near Osnabrück on August 26, 1944, eight American bomber crewmembers were captured and taken to *Dulag Luft* in Oberursel for interrogation (nearly two hundred miles away). However, before they reached Oberursel, two German military guards marched the flyers through the town of Rüsselsheim between 9:00 AM and 10:00 AM. However, citizens were “in an excited condition,” following the “longest and most destructive” bombing raid (carried out by the British) they experienced during the war and they quickly gathered around the airmen.³³ Slurs and insults quickly led demands for reprisal by civilians, including women, who shouted, “Beat them to pieces!,” “Beat them to death!,” “They are the ones, they are the ones who were here last night! They are the terrorizers of last night! Kill the dogs!”³⁴

According to the prosecution’s report, the flyers were bleeding after being struck countless times by rocks, shovels, hammers, and other foreign objects. “Perpetrators badly beat one flyer such that by the time the group neared the end of the Taunusstrasse ... a piece of stone was sticking in his skull.”³⁵ After

³³ Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-1497, Darmstadt by the Deputy Theater Judge Advocate’s Office – War Crimes Branch. August 23, 1945; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153, Entry 143, Box 361, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

continuing down various streets in downtown Rüsselsheim in an attempt to avoid the deadly onslaught, the flyers struggled to seek refuge. Eventually, their walk reduced to a crawl, huddling together on the ground for protection. The propaganda chief of Rüsselsheim administered the final blows, for those that were still alive, with a shot to the head. After experiencing roughly two hours of constant torture and beatings, Hitler Youth members removed their bodies, some still showing signs of life, to the local cemetery where they were buried later that afternoon. Perpetrators gave no forethought as to what might happen if these bodies were identified as each airman still wore their uniforms and dog tags. While two men received fifteen-year imprisonments and the nine remaining perpetrators, including the two women, were sentenced to death, only five men were actually executed. The remaining criminals were paroled by January 1954, after serving roughly eight and a half years.

No one questioned whether these American airmen should be treated humanely as POWs, let alone whether they were even responsible for the bombing of Rüsselsheim. All that matter to these (largely civilian) perpetrators was revenge. Enraged by the devastation along with personal and physical loss—as well as constantly influenced by propaganda, which condoned and reinforced in citizens the justice of revenge—individuals quickly grasped when an opportunity presented itself.

Regardless of accuracy, Goebbels sought to publicize lynchings for propaganda purposes.³⁶ He noted that local German police authorities were to report all attacks to the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA) in Berlin, “giving details as to place, time and number of dead and wounded. This central agency would have to forward this report ... to the Foreign Affairs Office for exploitation.”³⁷ Furthermore, a June 24, 1944 secret bulletin from the senior SS and political Führer West Göhrum informed local political leaders that in cases involving retaliation by the population, if the downed airman took any action against them, for example defending themselves or attacking back, they were to “immediately intervene with a firearm.”³⁸ In addition, “if the leader of a state or local office (police chief, district council, mayor) or a commander or leader of the Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*) decides that an immediate execution of a foreigner without a trial is needed, it is allowed ... in cases of immediate danger.”³⁹

³⁶ Unfortunately, the extent of the Germans' claims of Allied strafing is unknown.

³⁷ Ritter, “Draft of Letter,” *Trials of War Criminals*, 175-7.

³⁸ Bulletin from Senior SS and Political Führer West Göhrum. “Volksjustiz an plündernden Ausländern und abgesprungenen feindlichen Fliegern und Erschiessen dieser durch Ordnungspolizei,” from June 24, 1944. NARA, Record Group 549, Case 12-2000, Vol. 36; The Original German text states: “Gehen abgesprungene feindliche Besatzungsmitglieder gegen die Bevölkerung vor, so ist sofort mit der Schusswaffe einzugreifen.”

³⁹ Ibid.

A problem, however, that the Foreign Affairs Office had to solve was the re-designation of POWs in order to “justify” their deaths. In accordance with international rules of law, “when an enemy airman has been captured by the armed forces or by the police and has been delivered to the air corps reception camp at Oberursel, he thereby has already acquired the legal status of a prisoner of war.”⁴⁰ Since the procedure for “special treatment” (*Sonderbehandlung*) by the SD nearly always meant certain death, officials maintained that

an emergency solution would be to prevent suspected airmen from ever attaining a legal prisoner of war status; that is, that immediately upon seizure they be told that they are regarded not as prisoners of war, but as criminals, and that they will be delivered not to ... a prisoner of war camp, but to the authorities ... for the prosecution of criminal acts. ... If interrogations during those proceedings should reveal circumstances, which show that this special procedure is not applicable to the particular case, then the airmen concerned might ... be subsequently transferred to the legal status of prisoners of war by being sent to the reception camp at Oberursel. Naturally, even this expedient would not prevent Germany being accused of violating existing treaties, nor would it necessarily be a safeguard against reprisal measures ... against German prisoners of war. But at least this expedient would make it possible to follow a clear line, thus relieving us of the necessity of openly renouncing the present agreements, or, upon publication of each individual case, using excuses, which no one will believe.⁴¹

Additionally, the Air Force High Command ultimately was responsible for downed Allied airmen. Upon capture, the nearest airfield headquarters (*Fliegerhorstkommandantur*) was responsible for security of the crash site and collection of the airmen and information, along with gathering any personal property. This information was vital, as it allowed the Luftwaffe to salvage the aircraft in an attempt to gain insight into Allied technology as well as compile a thorough database on downed flyers that interrogators used at *Dulag Luft* in Oberursel. However, as First Lieutenant Maulbehre of the Luftwaffe wrote in a diary entry from October 2, 1944, Reichsmarschall Goering agreed to the orders by the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) that in cases where downed terror flyers were lynched by the population, the action of soldiers “may be issued by the air force as an order of the High Command of the Armed Forces but *not* as an order of the Air Force High Command.”⁴²

Although the Luftwaffe ultimately had jurisdiction over downed enemy flyers, there were often internal disputes among the SS, Nazi Party, police, and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ritter, “Draft of Letter,” *Trials of War Criminals*, 175–7.

⁴² War Diary by First Lieutenant Maulbehre, Operations Staff – Foreign Air Forces West, Concerning Conduct of Soldiers in Cases of Lynchings of Allied Airmen by the Population from October 2, 1944. *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No.10, Volume XI*. United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1960, 178–79.

Wehrmacht. As the historiography has shown—corroborated by airmen’s memoirs and testimonies—the Wehrmacht, in particular the Luftwaffe, offered the best chance of receiving appropriate treatment.⁴³ There was a general camaraderie between soldiers, meaning that airmen were usually afforded POW status and treated according to the laws of the Geneva Convention; however, members of the SS, Party, and police repeatedly sought to mistreat and execute downed Allied airmen. The execution of flyers was often justified by the perpetrators as either “self-defense” or “shot while attempting to escape.”

3. The Scale of Lynchjustiz and Profile of Perpetrators

The flyer trials were held throughout the United States zone of occupation, depending on location of the crime and availability of courts, as well as the assigned Army personnel, the accused, witnesses, and even audiences. Throughout the first year after the war, the majority of the trials were held in either Dachau or Ludwigsburg, as these were the two headquarters for the War Crime Investigation Teams (WCIT). By mid-1946, however, all war crime investigations and trials were taken over by the 7708 War Crimes Group, which relocated the remaining trials to Dachau. In order to get through the cases scheduled for trial as quickly as possible, the United States consolidated the 848 cases that involved all “lesser” war criminals into 460 trials—these became known as the “Dachau trials.” It was thus possible to have over seventy defendants combined in one trial. Ultimately, the United States’ goals of occupation shifted from punishing Germans for war crimes to enabling a self-sustaining economy and the growth of a democratic political system, which had a direct impact on the war crime trials. As a result, the 7708 War Crimes Group was officially disbanded in July of 1947. Open cases were handed over to West German officials in order to alleviate the insurmountable task of finding, investigating, and trying accused perpetrators of war crimes; however, the majority of perpetrators were released from prison by the mid-1950s. As historian Lisa Yavnai noted, “The release of convicted war criminals became a bargaining chip in the negotiations between the United States and West Germany over the latter’s integration into Western defense plans” (Yavnai 2007, 235). However, the release of war criminals not only hindered the German public from accept-

⁴³ Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-2370; Deputy Theater Judge Advocate’s Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153; Entry 143; Box 419, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-1994; Deputy Theater Judge Advocate’s Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946; Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153; Entry 143; Box 403, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; “Citizens Menaced Hamburg Bombers,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1943; “Germany Admits Fliers’ Lynchings,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1944.

ing responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime but it also impeded the understanding and discourse of *Lynchjustiz* committed against American airmen.

Despite their attempts to shed light on the “lesser” war criminals of World War II, the Dachau trials as a whole narrowly advanced the understanding of Nazi terror and *Lynchjustiz* committed against downed American airmen. A few key cases were published throughout the world, e.g. the Rüsselsheim Massacre, however, these failed to educate the German public, and even the world, about the extent of Nazi terror and the type of individuals involved in committing such atrocities. Even until now, historians have failed to place *Lynchjustiz* within the broader aspect of Nazi atrocities or the larger impact of these events on history. However, after the fall of 1946, the likelihood of uncovering additional crimes committed against American airmen became remote as the United States faced the looming Cold War (with the Soviet Blockade of West Berlin beginning in 1948 and the Korean War beginning in 1950); Germany also sought to quickly move on from its Nazi past.

Analyzing 164 flyer trials held between 1945 to 1947 regarding airmen mistreated in Germany revealed that 464 perpetrators were charged with “deliberately and wrongfully encourag[ing], aid[ing], abet[ting], and participat[ing] in committing assaults upon (or killing of) a ... surrendered prisoner of war.”⁴⁴ The victims included 320 American airmen: 73 percent were killed and 27 percent survived the mistreatment.⁴⁵ These trials represent roughly half of the total number of cases that investigated the mistreatment of downed American flyers. While a large number of these cases were never brought to trial, due to lack of evidence and witnesses, along with the inability to apprehend the alleged perpetrator, this initial analysis clearly indicates that far more Allied flyers were mistreated than scholars have previously alleged.

Of the 320 American airmen analyzed in this study, over 50 percent of the flyers’ identities remain unknown. In numerous cases, airmen’s bodies were never recovered; yet, this did not deter some trials from convicting alleged perpetrators. The extent that perpetrators took to cover up these known crimes is clear. This made it often necessary for the prosecutors to rely on circumstantial evidence in postwar trials and to include witness testimonies that relied on hearsay evidence. Additionally, local Germans were rather uncooperative in the criminal investigations after the war, and this hindered determining the identity

⁴⁴ Deputy Theater Judge Advocate’s Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153, Entry 143, Box 155-510, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁵ Nearly twenty-three percent of all airmen in the flyer trials were identified by their rank. Over fifty-three percent of the known American airmen were officers and over forty-six percent were enlisted men. Furthermore, at least sixty percent of all airmen were identified as bomber crewmembers. The majority of whom (over seventy percent) were killed through *Lynchjustiz*.

and nationality of the flyers and the perpetrators. Finally, it often thwarted the possibility of uncovering additional cases.⁴⁶

Chart 3: Perpetrators Tried by Year Who Were Members of Illegal Organizations

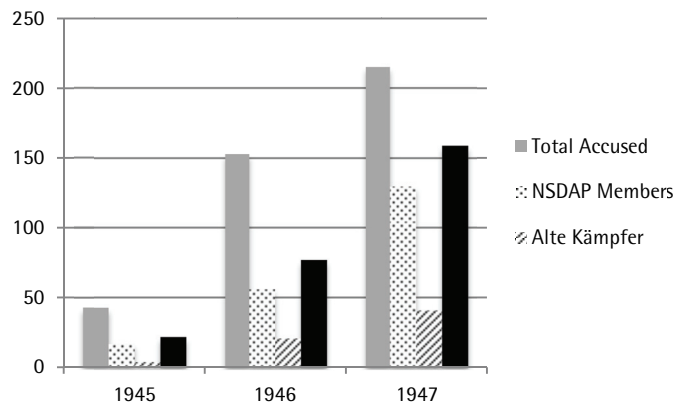
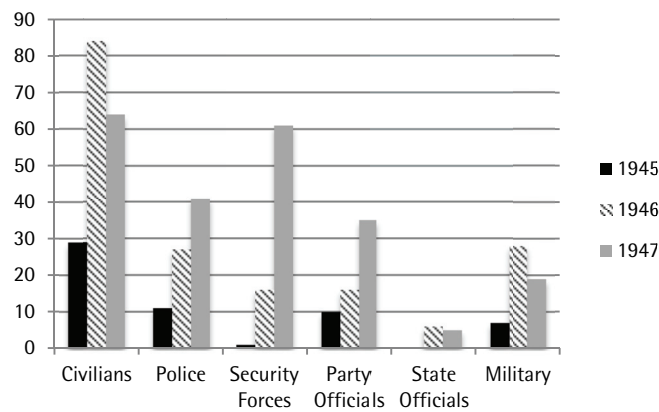


Chart 4: Trials Arraigned against Perpetrator Groups by Year



⁴⁶ For more information on the flyer trials, see: Hall 2018.

Table 1: Information Pertaining to Tried Perpetrators

Total number of perpetrators	464
Average age of perpetrators (during trials)	45-years-old
Known NSDAP members	50%
Range of years when perpetrators joined the NSDAP	1922 - 1943
NSDAP membership prior to 1933	61%
NSDAP membership prior to 1939	91%
Percentage of known " <i>Alte Kämpfer</i> " among perpetrators	30.5%

It appears that the courts sought to punish swiftly perpetrators who were long-standing members of the Nazi Party due to the large percentage of perpetrators tried in 1945 and 1946 that were members of the Nazi Party (50 percent). By 1947, this percentage increased to nearly 74 percent, as the pressure increased to bring criminals to justice for crimes committed against American nationals, as well as to bring the trials to a close [see Charts 3 and 4]. Furthermore, 61 percent of the accused had been members of the Nazi Party before 1933 [see Table 1], which clearly indicates the war crime trials pursued the so-called "old fighters" (*Alte Kämpfer*).⁴⁷

The *Alte Kämpfer* represented at least 30.5 percent of the accused in the postwar crime trials, which embodied a significantly large number of individuals proportional to the overall perpetrators tried (Kater 1983, 262).⁴⁸ Historians have indicated that less than seven percent of the total German population belonged to the Party before 1939; thus, these perpetrators on trial represented a very small segment of the German populace. Although it appears that the *Alte Kämpfer* were actively involved in ordering and personally carrying out *Lynchjustiz*, countless perpetrators, especially civilians, were not brought to justice for their participation in the violence. After the war, the difficulty in finding perpetrators persisted, as many disappeared into hiding or individuals refused to reveal known instances of *Lynchjustiz*.

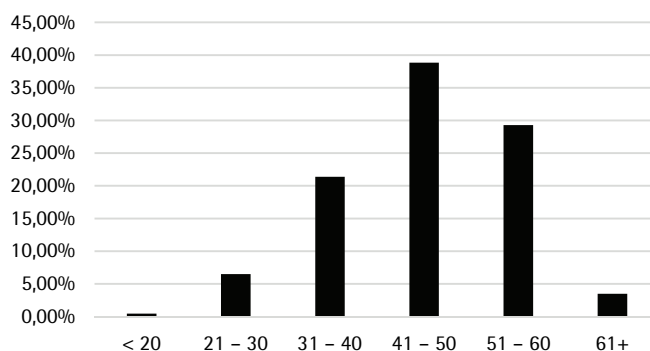
During the trials, the ages of perpetrators ranged between nineteen and seventy-two-years-old, with the average age being forty-five, which indicates an increased influence and role of the Nazi Party agenda [see Chart 5]. Accordingly, the perpetrators were often ardent supporters of the regime who had joined

⁴⁷ Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), RG 153, Entry 143, Box 155-510, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁸ According to 1933 and 1939 census records, the population went from around 65 million to roughly 69 million. In 1939, the Greater German Reich had a total population of roughly 79 million. Accounting for this additional population results in Nazi Party membership comprising roughly 6.33 percent of the total population of the Greater German Reich.

the Nazi Party before Hitler had come to power. Women were also involved in *Lynchjustiz* committed against downed airmen; although, only seven women (less than 2 percent of all known perpetrators) were tried. However, there was a significant dark figure regarding the number of perpetrators (both men and women) who evaded capture. Flyers' memoirs and Escape and Evasion reports often reported the viciousness of civilian crowds, which were reported to have numbered hundreds of individuals and often consisted of women.⁴⁹ Although just being an Allied flyer was often more than enough justification for German reprisals, studies have shown that race, ethnicity, and religion also played a role in the treatment of POWs in general.⁵⁰ While these three aspects were occasionally mentioned in the flyer trials, it is likely that further research will reveal additional cases.

Chart 5: Breakdown of Perpetrators by Age



Austrian historian Georg Hoffmann characterized perpetrators as either instigators (*Stimmungsmacher/innen*), who promoted and condoned the lynching of airmen (*Fliegerlynchjustiz*), or followers (*Mitläufer*) who were often provoked by the “Bystander Effect” (Hoffmann 2015, 324).⁵¹ However, this is similar to the designated categories of the denazification process, which according to German historian Lutz Niethammer resulted in creating a *Mitläuferfabrik*, literally a “factory to produce followers” (Niethammer 1982).⁵² Using these categories results in blaming a small group of Nazi elites for *Lynchjustiz* and ignores not only other types of individuals involved, but also the various mo-

⁴⁹ According to trial data, over fifty-two percent of the known perpetrators represented the working class (with occupations such as farmers, butchers, bakers, carpenters, and mechanics) and over forty-four percent embodied the lower-middle class (which, for example, included administration official, police, merchants, teachers, and electricians).

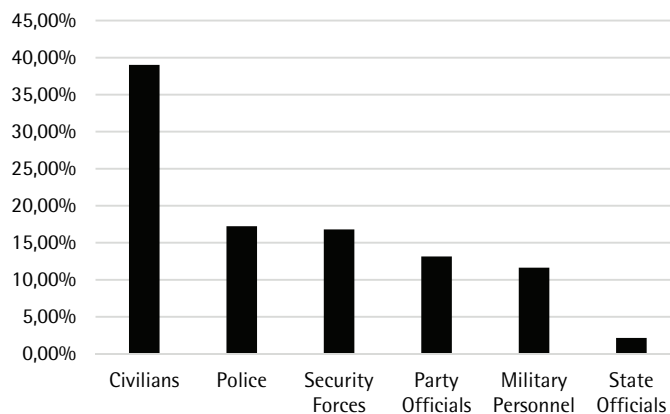
⁵⁰ For example, see: Drooz 2004; Whitlock 2009; Wolk 2016 and Carlson 2005.

⁵¹ See also: Barnett 1999.

⁵² See also: Cohen 2006.

tives that influenced their involvement. Therefore, it is more appropriate to characterize the perpetrators into six main groups (civilians, police, security forces, Party officials, military personnel, and state officials) in an attempt to better represent the broader German society and ultimately understand the type of individuals that committed *Lynchjustiz* against flyers.⁵³

Chart 6: Groups Tried for Their Involvement in Lynchjustiz (by Percentage)



Civilians represented the largest number of perpetrators tried with 39 percent [Chart 6].⁵⁴ Closer examination indicates that they overwhelmingly represented the number of assaults committed against downed airmen with 70 percent [see Chart 7].⁵⁵ The civilians acted primarily out of rage and distress in response to the destruction caused by the air war. This was an extremely emotional situation that Party officials used to their advantage by inciting the public – through propaganda – to seek revenge.⁵⁶

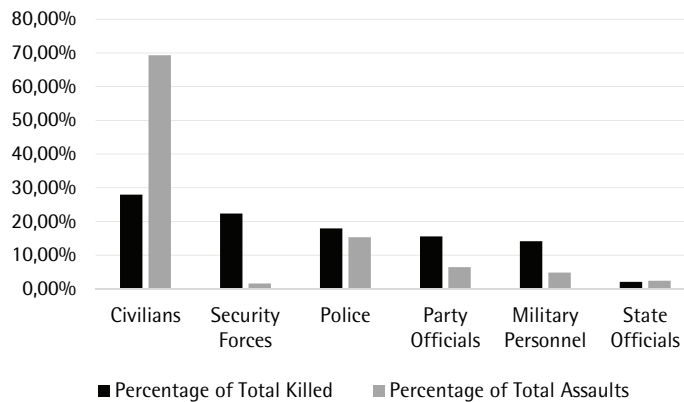
⁵³ Lisa Yavnai's noteworthy dissertation and subsequent article about the Dachau trials categorizes perpetrators as civilians, Nazi officials, and military; however, the separation of military and paramilitary is very important given the increased radicalization of the paramilitary organizations. See: Yavnai 2007.

⁵⁴ Examples of civilian perpetrators include farmers, teachers, students, shoemakers, chemists, butchers, bakers, innkeepers, merchants, salesmen, musicians, carpenters, plumbers, machinists, mechanics, painters, attorneys, businessmen, and housewives. NARA, Record Group No. 242/388, Roll No. 10, Frame No.12 792.

⁵⁵ Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, January 16, 1946. Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army). RG 153, Entry 143, Box 155-510. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁶ In this study, members of the Volkssturm are included in the category of civilians since members were largely young boys, old men, and even women. Moreover, the Volkssturm was considered a national militia, which served mostly as a last line of defense and often given the task (by Party officials, security forces, and police) of rounding up downed airmen. The Volkssturm often blurred the boundaries between paramilitary and civilians. Although,

Chart 7: Percentage of Perpetrators Involved in Lynchjustiz



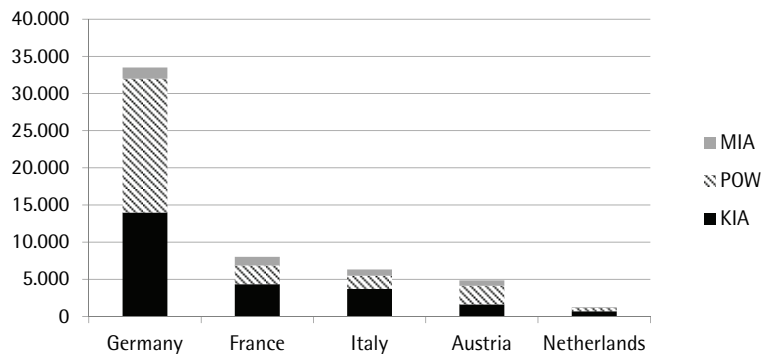
The police (e.g. Kripo, Orpo, Gendarmerie, as well as Rural and Auxiliary police forces) represented the second largest group of perpetrators tried with 17.25 percent. These individuals often acted on orders from party officials and security force members – or at least often claimed this as their defense after the war. Members of security forces, which consisted of SS, SD, and Gestapo, represented 16.81 percent of perpetrators. The greatest disparity between involvement in killings and assaults within a single group existed with the security forces; this further verifies the known brutality of this group. Party officials (e.g. county and district Nazi Party leaders – *Kreisleiter* and *Ortsgruppenleiter*) represented 13.14 percent of perpetrators and were most likely to be indoctrinated and radicalized by the Nazi regime. Party officials and members of security forces were prosecuted mainly for giving orders to mistreat and kill downed airmen, although their active participation in *Lynchjustiz* was not uncommon. Military personnel and state officials (e.g. non-Party government officials) represented the groups that were least likely to be prosecuted for committing *Lynchjustiz* against downed airmen with 11.63 percent and 2.15 percent, respectively.

Despite a sense of camaraderie between the Wehrmacht (in particular the Luftwaffe) and Allied airmen, soldiers still mistreated and killed downed fly-

members were largely civilians before Hitler assembled the Volkssturm in October of 1944. Also, SA members have been characterized as civilians in this study. While they also blurred the roles between a security force and civilians, they most often acted in the role of a civilian. Moreover, they were not considered a criminal organization under the International Military Tribunal (IMT). The members that represent Security Forces (SS, SD, and Gestapo) were, however, clearly defined by the IMT as criminal organizations. For more information, see: Hall 2018; Nolzen 2008; Seidler 1989.

ers. This was often out of revenge for lost family members or out of fear of retaliation for not following orders. Nazi Party members were represented in every group and were most likely to be found guilty of direct involvement in killing downed American aviators. Nevertheless, the significant role of civilians involved in killings (27.94 percent) should not be underestimated.⁵⁷

Chart 8: Top Five Countries in Europe Where American Airmen Were Shot Down



As previously mentioned, *Lynchjustiz* committed against Allied flyers did not just occur within the boundaries of Germany. Airmen were shot down throughout Europe and this violence was not unique to American flyers, as airmen from every Allied nation experienced varying forms of mistreatment.⁵⁸ Despite the overwhelming majority of aviators being shot down over Germany [see Chart 8], flyers were constantly brought from other nations to Germany (if they

⁵⁷ For half of the civilians it remained unknown if they had been members of the Nazi Party. However, of the remaining civilians, 75 percent were confirmed to have been Party members, most of whom had joined before 1939.

⁵⁸ That being said, downed German flyers also experienced mistreatment in England during the Blitz; however, such instances were very rare and highlighted the difference between German and British societies. In particular, these differences emphasized the radicalization of war on German society. Moreover, the significance of the Nazi regime condoning and promoting *Lynchjustiz* against downed Allied airmen is clear when compared to the British government not tolerating such violence or following international laws of war. According to British historian Clive Emsley, "At least two British officers ... were found guilty by courts martial and dismissed for assaulting captured German aircrew shot down over the south of England in 1940 and 1941." See also: Emsley 2013. For more information, see the following records at the British National Archives in London: WO 71/1048; WO 71/1061; See also: Niall 1998; Longden 2004; Schnatz 2002.

were not killed through *Lynchjustiz*) for interrogation at the Luftwaffe interrogation center (*Dulag Luft*) in Oberursel.⁵⁹

Chart 9: Groups Involved in Lynchjustiz

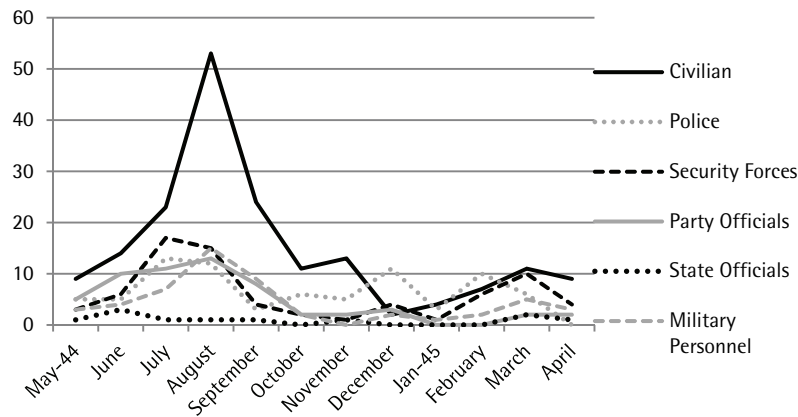
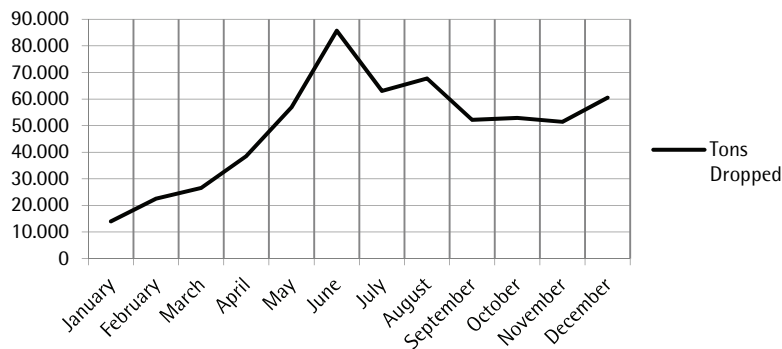


Chart 10: Tons of Bombs Dropped by the United States in the European Theater in 1944



The drastic increase in violence that immediately followed Goebbels' public call for the German populace to defend the *Volksgemeinschaft* in May of 1944 is clearly discernable when analyzing *Lynchjustiz* cases [Chart 9].⁶⁰ Despite the

⁵⁹ Army Battle Casualties and Nonbattle Deaths in World War II – Final Report: December 7, 1941 – December 31, 1946 Statistical and Accounting Branch Office of the Adjutant General, 1950.

⁶⁰ Joseph Goebbels 1944.

constant Allied bombardment of Germany [Chart 10], the flyer trials indicated that *Lynchjustiz* gradually decreased into the winter of 1944.

The increase in violence against downed airmen in the summer of 1944 and Goebbels' public approval of *Lynchjustiz* cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. Rather, propaganda combined with the escalating air war and Goebbels' ability to persuade Hitler to engage German society in "total war" resulted in an increased number of downed airmen falling victim to *Lynchjustiz*. The mistreatment of flyers was most likely to result in death throughout the summer of 1944; however, violence increased during the final months of the war, as the Nazi regime called for the continued defense of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Although the number of cases did not reach the levels of the previous summer, the brutality persisted.

The last known case of *Lynchjustiz* against an American flyer in Germany was on April 16, 1945. Captain Chester F. Coggeshall from Hyannis, Massachusetts [Image 7] crash-landed near Sillersdorf, Germany, roughly seven miles northwest of Salzburg, after strafing an airfield in the area.

Image 7: Captain Chester F. Coggeshall (center) and His P-51 Mustang, the "Cape Cod Express" (Courtesy of Russ Abbey and Frank Birtciel)⁶¹



According to the postwar crime trial held at Ludwigsburg on November 13 and 14, 1945, around 2:30 in the afternoon flak damage caused Coggeshall's airplane to lose altitude, forcing him to attempt a high-speed belly landing. The airplane's right wing dug into the ground, resulting in the airplane cartwheeling through a small building on the edge of the field. Slightly wounded, Coggeshall exited the wreckage hoping to evade capture; however, members of the local

⁶¹ "55th Fighter Group Website." Russ Abbey and Frank Birtciel. <<http://www.station131.co.uk/55th/Pilots/343rd%20Pilots/Coggeshall%20Chester%20E.%20Jr.%20Capt..htm>>

Gendarmerie and German Army immediately captured and escorted him to Freilassing. There, the mayor, who was also district Nazi Party leader (*Ortsgruppenleiter*) of Freilassing and a Party member since 1931, denied Coggeshall first aid treatment. Acting on alleged orders from the county Nazi Party leader (*Kreisleiter*) of Berchtesgaden, the mayor, accompanied by German soldiers, took Coggeshall in the evening hours into the woods near Freilassing and shot him twice in the head. For his crime, the United States war crime tribunal sentenced the mayor to death, and he was executed on March 15, 1946.⁶²

4. Conclusion

If the historiography is accurate that a similar number of British war crime trials investigated the mistreatment of a comparable number of downed British airmen, the occurrences of *Lynchjustiz* committed against downed British and American airmen in Germany conservatively exceeded 600 (Blank 2008, 466).⁶³ However, the American and British war crime trials that investigated *Lynchjustiz* focused largely on the occupied areas of West Germany. Accounting for a large dark figure, which includes cases of *Lynchjustiz* that occurred in what became the German Democratic Republic, it is likely that there were at least 1,000 cases of *Lynchjustiz* against Allied airmen within Germany's postwar borders. However, hundreds of cases remain overlooked, especially those in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Poland. Preliminary research on violence against American airmen in the aforementioned nations concluded that *Lynchjustiz* occurred most often in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This is reasonable given the increased number of airmen shot down over these countries, the presence of German military and security forces, ardent collaborators, as well as civilians affected by the radicalized air war (tens of thousands of pro-Allied civilians died in bombings during the war). Taking into consideration *Lynchjustiz* committed against all Allied airmen throughout Europe results in a conservative estimate of 3,000 cases of mistreatment.⁶⁴ Considering this, along with accounting for airmen abused in POW and concentration camps and during death marches at the end of the war, it is likely that roughly one out of every ten Allied airman that survived being shot down was mistreated.⁶⁵

⁶² Review and Recommendations for Case No. 12-1155. Deputy Theater Judge Advocate's Office, War Crimes Branch, February 6, 1946. Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army). RG 153, Entry 143, Box 345; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶³ See also: Stiepani 1999.

⁶⁴ For more information on the scale of *Lynchjustiz* committed against downed airmen, see Hall 2018.

⁶⁵ Over 35,000 American airmen were held as POWs in Germany. See: "Battle Casualties in Air Corps, by place, type and disposition," *Army Battle Casualties and Non-battle Deaths in*

Analyzing the violence of *Lynchjustiz* can help understand better the nature of dictatorial terror as well as of evil itself (Johnson 2000, 464). Moreover, understanding the process of *Lynchjustiz* against downed airmen in Germany permits further clarification about the complex relationship between war and society. As exhibited in the hundreds of known cases of violence against American airmen during World War II, rationalization and ethics could be altered relatively quickly in an attempt to justify the radicalizing violence. Although the violence against airmen affected a minority of Allied flyers, it occurred far more often than previously acknowledged. Yet, the effects of the radicalized war did not perversely destroy people's sense of morality, ethics, and the rule of law, as one might have thought given the scale of atrocities committed by Germany during the war. German citizens' personal experiences in the war, the influence their experiences had on their attitude toward the Nazi regime, their previous familiarity with the United States and Britain, their religious and moral principles, as well as the phase of the war were all influential in the treatment of downed Allied airmen.

The air war, compelled by the radicalization of Nazi atrocities, removed any form of security on the German home front. As a consequence, the Nazi regime sought to harness the outrage of the German population, redirecting their anger explicitly against downed Allied airmen. The regime took advantage of German citizens' vulnerability in the overwhelming and lethal air war that erased nearly all physical and psychological boundaries. While a large portion of German society likely desired retribution against downed Allied airmen for their role in the devastating air war, a minority of Germans—largely *Alte Kämpfer* (early supporters of the Nazi Party) and other ardent supporters of the regime, along with individuals who were deeply affected by the devastating air war, and citizens who were influenced by propaganda and those in positions of authority—actually resorted to carrying out *Lynchjustiz*.

While many perpetrators argued that they were ordered to partake in *Lynchjustiz* and that any opposition could have resulted in death, it is important to remember that these criminals, especially Party officials and security forces, created these often false and self-serving characterizations in an attempt to escape prosecution after the war. However, an interpretation that points to a limited civilian involvement in *Lynchjustiz* is similarly misguided. Similar to how historians demonstrated (beginning in the 1990s) that German citizens willingly took part, albeit in varying degrees, in violence under the Nazi regime, Nazi terror (e.g. *Lynchjustiz*) similarly relied heavily on civilians to take part willfully and emphatically.⁶⁶ The enormous culpability of lower-level officials, for example po-

World War II – Final Report: December 7, 1941–December 31, 1946, Statistical and Accounting Branch Office of the Adjutant General, 1950, 78; For more information, see Makepeace 2017.

⁶⁶ For example, see: Browning 1992; Goldhagen 1997.

lice, Party officials, and security forces, in ordering and personally carrying out the violence against downed Allied airmen should not be obscured.

Although Nazi Germany was a police state, it “allowed most of its citizens considerable room ... for the venting of everyday frustrations,” as social scientist and historian Eric A. Johnson has stressed (Johnson 2000, 485). *Lynchjustiz* is an excellent example of this. The regime allowed violence against downed flyers to ease the mounting pressure within the German population, as living under the bombs and among the ruins increased anxiety, fear, and anger, as well as amplified the Nazi regime’s pursuit of maintaining control over German society. Thus, *Lynchjustiz* was not only used as an additional line of defense in the drastic downfall of the Third Reich, but it also provided an ancillary attempt for citizens to seek revenge, soothe public anger, and put fear in the minds of Allied airmen.

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